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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/20/2016

TAGS: PGOV PREL PTER LE IS SY

SUBJECT: LEBANON: PM SINIORA RECOGNIZES NEED TO ENHANCE ARMS EMBARGO, READY FOR OPTIONS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Christopher W. Murray. Reason: Section 1.4 (b).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Prime Minister Siniora expressed an interest in exploring further ways to enhance the arms embargo provisions of UNSCR 1701. Although he would not provide immediate endorsement for any specific ideas, such as establishing a United Nations "embargo committee," Siniora said they merited further study and discussion. Noting daily Israeli overflights of Lebanon, Siniora asked whether there was some way that the Israelis could be satisfied in some other way. He asked the USG to be patient with his government's efforts on political and economic reform, reporting that steady progress was being made. Concerning regional interference in Lebanon, Siniora confided that he was well aware that Syria and Iran were carrying out a destabilization effort against his government and had become more adroit at using their political allies within Lebanon. But Siniora expressed complete confidence that pro-reform forces would successfully meet the challenge, especially if progress could be made on the Shebaa Farms and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Finally, the Prime Minister said he had formed a team to prepare for the upcoming Paris III Donors Conference. He said he will travel to Japan, Russia, and Saudi Arabia to present Lebanon's case for assistance. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) Prime Minister Fouad Siniora received visiting NEA DAS Robert Danin and the Charge at the Grand Serail on October 20. Senior political advisors Mohammed Chattah and Rola Nouraddine also attended the meeting. DAS Danin presented two letters from the President, one conveying Eid wishes, and the second which outlined planned U.S. security assistance to Lebanon. Siniora expressed warm thanks to the President for his correspondence and said that Lebanon welcomed valuable U.S. aid to his country's hard-pressed and poorly equipped security services.

ARMS EMBARGO ENFORCEMENT IS CRITICAL

¶3. (C) In response to the Prime Minister's criticisms of continuing Israeli overflights of Lebanese territory, Danin explained to Siniora that unless the arms embargo provisions of UNSCR 1701 were more tightly enforced, his arguments against Israel would remain compromised. The embargo is essential. Danin asked whether there were ways to tighten the embargo while meeting the concerns of both Lebanon and

Israel. Would Lebanon find it useful, for example, for international monitors to deploy along the Syrian-Lebanese border? What about the possible creation of an "Air UNIFIL" which could monitor border crossings, or the creation of an "embargo committee" that could report on and discuss suspected arms violations?

¶4. (C) PM Siniora said that he was interested in exploring proposals that could break the current stalemate, which he acknowledged was not satisfactory to either Lebanon or Israel. The Prime Minister asked for more details and said he would consider any proposal that was equitable. Citing the 1974 Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreements as a possible model worthy of further examination, Siniora was particularly interested in the possibility that the UN could conduct aerial monitoring vice what he termed as provocative and destabilizing Israeli activity in Lebanon's sovereign airspace. He asked how the Western countries could not see the "double standard" that allowed the IDF to overfly Lebanon at will while UNIFIL was charged by the Security Council with monitoring and preventing violations on the ground. Siniora said it was time for new ideas that respected sovereignty and provided confidence, and encouraged the U.S. to continue to explore such ideas further.

SINIORA RECOGNIZES THE THREAT,
BUT REMAINS CONFIDENT

¶5. (C) In response to concerns expressed about Damascus' efforts to weaken his government, Siniora said that he understood both Syria and Iran were engaged in activities designed to destabilize Lebanon and roll back the democratic advances made in the past year. Siniora said that Syria, in particular, had become more subtle recently and was

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effectively employing its political allies within Lebanon to criticize and weaken the pro-reform movement led by the March 14 coalition government. Clearly referring to recent speeches made by Hizballah, the Free Patriotic Movement, and other anti-reform parties, Siniora said it was ironic that authoritarian Syria could use the media and free speech of an open society to push its agenda. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister was confident that his strategy of slow, steady pressure was turning the tide, and said that he was determined to stay the course. Siniora pointed to the recent appointment (and Cabinet approval) of highly capable individuals to a broad range of key diplomatic posts, as well as a steady increase in government appointments based on competency rather than influence.

¶6. (C) Siniora also pointed out that his government was moving ahead on economic reform and had just selected a team that would prepare a progressive, comprehensive plan in preparation for the Paris III Donors Conference to be held in January. Siniora declared, "despite tremendous pressures (from Hizballah and other Syrian proxies), we are moving steadily ahead." He urged the U.S. and Lebanon's other allies in the international community to continue their support. The Prime Minister stated that his political enemies may resort to street demonstrations and other "threatening" behavior, but again he expressed his belief that pro-democratic forces were gaining strength and endurance. He maintained that his unwavering policy of "soft words, but firm positions" was winning over supporters and confounding his adversaries.

STILL MAINTAINS SHEBAA IS THE KEY

¶7. (C) Siniora contended that pro-democratic forces would accrue even greater advantage if Israel could be persuaded to abandon its "static and counter-productive" position that any movement on Shebaa Farms would be viewed as a Hizballah victory. He argued that it was time for Israel to take an

entirely fresh approach on Shebaa that would not only end its problematic "occupation of Lebanese territory" once and for all, but would actually allow Israel to achieve its long-sought objective of a secure northern border. Siniora stated that he had recently received several "signals" from Israeli PM Olmert, but they were invariably tied to the "old, classical formula" (of a separate peace with Lebanon) and were actually "unhelpful."

¶8. (C) The Prime Minister then provided a lengthy presentation of why Shebaa was "clearly" Lebanese territory. He argued that if Shebaa could be removed from the radical agenda, it would deprive the anti-reform elements, and especially Hizballah, of a powerful argument to continue their resistance. PM Siniora maintained that if the Israelis turned the territory over to UN custody pending formal determination of sovereignty (which could take many years), Israel would be able to deflect criticism from the Arab world and at the same time greatly increase its security along its northern border. PM Siniora tried to frame his proposal as a win-win situation, where Lebanon's pro-reform forces would gain a resonant victory, and Israel would get rid of a useless political albatross. Danin noted that it was hard to see how Israel would embrace the proposal, given its experience with its 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon and its 2005 disengagement from Gaza. He also asked how Siniora thought such an approach could proceed, given Syria's resistance to demarcating the Syrian-Lebanese border.

WHITHER THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLIFT

¶9. (C) PM Siniora also asked about U.S. strategy with regard to regional peace. He stated that immediately following the July-August conflict in Lebanon, he and many others in the region thought the U.S. and other Western powers would make a concerted effort to rekindle Israeli-Palestinian progress. Siniora said that many credible observers and participants believed that a window of opportunity had opened. But the Prime Minister suggested that it now appeared the post-conflict activity did not presage real movement on this critical issue, and may even have been completely unrelated. Siniora believed this was unfortunate, because even though the process would be extremely difficult, a just and lasting peace for the Palestinian people would completely change the Arab and Muslim world. In his opinion, a "new era" would commence

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which would not only allow a long-static Arab world to progress on many fronts, but would also produce almost immeasurable benefits for the West and the forces of moderation.

¶10. (C) Pointing to the President's September UNGA speech and the Secretary's subsequent regional visit, Danin said that the U.S. sought to realize the President's vision of peace and was working with partners in the region to strengthen President Abbas and encourage the development of a reliable Palestinian partner with whom Israel could negotiate. The roadmap remains the best option, given that Israel, the Palestinians and the international community all embrace it. PM Siniora said he understood the reasoning, but cautioned that endless and effectively meaningless maneuvering could severely damage a process upon which the stability of the entire region depended. As he had stated earlier in his discussion of 1701 enforcement, the Prime Minister urged the U.S. and Israel to consider completely new approaches in their attempt to resolve an issue of "absolute centrality" to the region.

¶11. (U) This message has been cleared by DAS Danin.
MURRAY